

# Carolina Conductor



Volume 7 Number 10

Monthly Newsletter of the Carolina Railroad Heritage Association, Inc.

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## Preserving the Past Active in the Present Planning for the Future

**Web Site:** hubcityrrmuseum.org  
**Facebook:** Carolina Railroad Heritage Association & Hub City RR Museum

**Meeting Site:**  
**Woodmen of the World Bldg.**  
721 East Poinsett Street  
Greer, SC 29651-6404  
Third Friday of the Month at 7:00 pm

**Hub City Railroad Museum and  
SOU Rwy Caboose #X3115:**  
**Spartanburg Amtrak Station**  
298 Magnolia Street  
Spartanburg, SC 29301-2330  
Wednesday 10-2 and Saturday 10-2

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Articles can be submitted anytime.

# Observation Cars

An observation car (often abbreviated to simply observation or obs) is a type of railroad passenger car, generally operated in a passenger train as the last car, with windows on the rear of the car for passengers' viewing pleasure. The cars were nearly universally removed from service on American railroads beginning in the 1950s as a cost-cutting measure to eliminate the need to turn the trains when operating out of stub-end terminals.

The main spotting feature of observation cars is at the "B" end (rear) of the car; the walls of lightweight and streamlined cars usually round together to form a tapered U shape, smoothly or with a door, and larger panoramic windows were installed all around the end of the car. On older heavyweight cars, the rear end of the car consisted of an enlarged, canopied porch-like open vestibule platform area, with the door and enlarged windows set back into the car, giving wind-wing shelter from the draft. Whether old or new there was frequently a large open lounge in the B end where passengers could enjoy the view as they watched the track recede into the distance, and usually (but not always) equipped as a club car with a bar or buffet where soft drinks,



New round end Obs. ↑

↓ Old platform end Obs.



cocktails and snacks could be purchased.

This differs from non-revenue business cars or private varnish, which may have featured the normally locked center communicating door to the rest of the train to a corridor along one side leading to the salon with doors to a pantry and small galley which was often convertible to dormitory for the chef and porter/steward at night with a

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# Caboose Happenings

Why the floor  
needs replacing! →



Installing the new window  
frames. ↓



↓ New commercial side door. ↑

↓ Installing the new smokestack. →



## Wanted—Articles for the Carolina Conductor

Submit an article of 200 words or more with some photos and captions and see them in print. Every one of us has some unique railroad experience that would make interesting reading for our membership. Your editor always needs more contributions of local railway history and news.

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diminished side door for loading supplies, then a private restroom/bathing-room, one or two deluxe private rooms for a personal secretary perhaps and the line's vice president, a locked china/silver/liquor cabinet along the final dividing wall facing a large open multi-purpose lounge.

The lounge was often fitted with fold down overhead bunks above a retractable dining/conference table over sub-deck storage, a conductor's desk with secured storage for train log, wine log, and merchant's account books along with relevant gauges such as air pressure and speedometer at the track inspection viewing window recessed behind the expanded observation platform, which was fenced with opulent railing supporting an (optional) illuminated drumhead at the B end.

Among North American railroads, the observation cars often featured any of a variety of upcharge revenue seating, reserved sitting/drawing rooms or sleeper

roomettes in the forward section, in the form of reclining coach seats, plush parlor car chairs near side tables or bedrooms and the occasional crew dormitory, such configurations varying greatly between railroads. A lighted drumhead adornment, usually indicating the name of the train or the name/logo of the railroad would invariably be hung from the tail end of the observation car. Some early trains offered two observation cars: a traditional enclosed type for its compartment or first-class passengers and an open type resembling a flat car for its tourist class riders.



Platform Obs car interior. ↑

↓ Round end Obs interior.



## History

When passenger trains were still the preferred mode of intercity transportation in America, observations often were used by those campaigning for public office, especially for the Presidency of the United States such as United States Railcar No. 1, the *Ferdinand Magellan*. On a whistle stop train tour the candidate's train would pull into town and stop with the observation end at the station, then the candidate would appear on the observation platform to deliver his stump speech. The observation platform made a perfect temporary stage for just such an event. Like political candidates, famous personalities such as members of a royal family or film stars would use the open observation car end as a stage from which they would greet well-wishers and fans during public tours.

In more recent years, presidents Jimmy Carter, George H.W. Bush, Bill Clinton, and Barack Obama have used a heavyweight observation car built by the Pullman Standard Company in 1930. This car is the

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Georgia 300.

**Industrial Design**

While the cars manufactured by companies such as Pullman-Standard conformed to somewhat standard designs, some railroads created their own distinctive designs for observation ends. For example, the Milwaukee Road's passenger trains were often rounded out with either a Skytop Lounge or a finned Beavertail observation the latter due to noted industrial designer Otto Kuhler. The Milwaukee's observations were easily recognizable as the observation end of the cars were not only rounded, but also slanted toward the front of the car, often with windows extending up from the normal window height to the roofline.



MILW Beaver Tail Obs car. ↑  
↓ MILW Skytop Lounge Obs car.



The Milwaukee's observations, including the Skytops, lacked a drumhead, whose place was taken by a large oscillating rear light; instead, each tapered side carried the generic Milwaukee script name "Hiawatha" embossed on stainless steel trim flanking this light. The Milwaukee's Skytops—four parlor cars built in the railroad's own shops and six sleepers built by Pullman-Standard—were designed by noted industrial designer Brooks Stevens. Six railroads bought dome-observation cars from Budd — the Chicago, Burlington and Quincy Railroad, the Denver and Rio Grande Western Railroad, and the Western Pacific Railroad for use on their joint

*California Zephyr*, and the Canadian Pacific Railway for *The Canadian* and *The Dominion*. The WP touted this combination car type as "the best of



**Drumheads.**

both worlds" in passenger amenities. The Wabash used the cars on their "Bluebird", Chicago to St. Louis, and the Chesapeake and Ohio for the "Chessie" which never went into service. The C&O cars were sold to the Denver & Rio Grande and ran on the "Royal Gorge".

**Modern Use**

As described above, the observation car on scheduled passenger trains has largely fallen victim to increased operational costs. An outstanding exception is Via Rail's *Canadian*, which still operates on every tri-weekly trip between Toronto and Vancouver with the same dome observation-lounge cars in use on the train since 1955.



VIA Rail Canadian traversing the Rocky mountains.

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**Amtrak Sightseer lounge cars interior.**

On several long-distance Amtrak routes outside the Northeast Corridor where most trains are equipped with Superliner cars, there are Sightseer Lounge cars. These combine extra window exposure on an upper observation level with a lounge area and dormitory facilities on lower levels of the trains, though are



**NP, GN, and CB&Q observation cars. ↑  
↓ Modern high-level observation car.**



**SBD flat-end observation car with drumhead. ↑  
↓ Wabash Railroad *Bluebird* observation car.**



**Alaska Railroad business car. ↑  
↓ Early tinplate observation car model.**



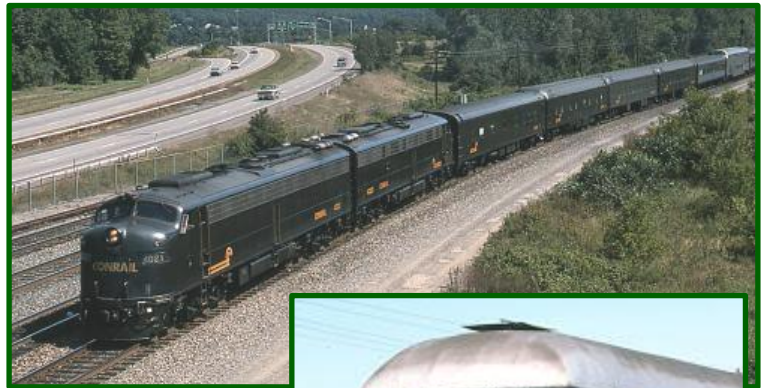
# Office Car Special

An Office car Special (OCS) is composed of passenger cars that are privately owned by the railroad corporation and which travels along their rail lines, so that upper level management can review facilities, assess the addition or reconstruction of facilities that are needed for expansion or modernization; as well as streamlining of operations or removal of obsolete infrastructure. Also, these trains are used to escort visiting upper level management from other railroads for the purpose of a proposed purchase or sale of a rail line. The following photos are examples of different railroad's OCS trains.



BNSF OCS. ↑

↓ AMTK OCS train with picture window.



← CP OCS.  
Conrail OCS ↑



Conrail Obs car. →

← CN OCS.



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CSX OCS. →

↓ CSX Obs car.



KCS OCS. →

PANAM Rwy OCS. ↓



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And of course, the NS OCS and Obs car.



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